

BIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: Maile Lee, 52, lei seller

*"It was such a wonderful atmosphere at the old airport. The old cliché, it was so full of aloha spirit. It was even more than that . . . it was the people."*

Maile Lee, Hawaiian-Caucasian, was born in Pā'ia, Maui in 1933. Her parents, Alice Lindsay and John Kalani, lived and worked on the sugar plantation. Lee began her education at Pā'ia Elementary and later attended 'Īao Elementary.

When Lee was about six years old, she moved to Honolulu with her mother and brothers. Her mother went to work as a nurse at the Territorial Hospital in Kāne'ohe. Soon after their move, Lee's mother was remarried to Eddie La'anui.

Lee continued her schooling at Royal and Ali'iolani Schools. She went on to Stevenson Intermediate and graduated from Roosevelt High School.

In 1945, her stepfather ventured into the lei-selling business with his sister, Gladys Chung. They opened Gladys Lei Stand near the airport on Lagoon Drive. It was a success, and after only two months Lee's parents opened their own stand, Eddie and Alice's.

Shortly after high school she married John Lee. She continued to work at the lei stand while raising four children. In 1962, she became the owner of her parents' lei stand and changed the name to Maile's Lei Stand.

Today, Maile Lee still operates her business at the airport. She likes to spend her free time with her grandchildren and husband, who is retired from Pan Am Airlines.

Tape No. 14-9-1-85

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Maile Lee (ML)

October 17, 1985

Kaimukī, O'ahu

BY: 'Iwalani Hodges (IH)

IH: This is an interview with Maile Lee at her home in Kaimukī, Honolulu, Hawai'i, on October 17, 1985. Interviewer is 'Iwalani Hodges.

Okay, Mrs. Lee, can we start off by asking when you were born?

ML: Certainly. I was born in Pā'ia, Maui. The year was 1933. It was (a) plantation area. Very nice (and country).

IH: Was it a plantation home?

ML: Yes, it was. My mom and dad both were with the plantations. To begin with, my mother was a maid for one of the Baldwin families. I've forgotten the first name. But my dad was not quite hō hana (hoe hana), but he was an accountant, I guess you would say. It was (a) very nice life. It was small, and different areas had different camps. We were in (the) Hawaiian Camp. The Spanish Camp was next to us. And there was a Filipino Camp and a Japanese Camp. It was (a) very nice experience.

IH: So, the camps were separated by ethnicity?

ML: Yes, (they were).

IH: But were you folks all friends . . .

ML: We were more or less cloistered together and very friendly, [yes]. If you got tired of eating your own kind of food, you'd go to the neighbor's house and, boy, they'd feed us. Fresh bread from the outdoor ovens (was) baked, oh, I think it was maybe twice a week. And the Puerto Ricans would bring over gandule beans and rice. It was a great adventure and it was a fun time. There're still reunions now, where I've never gone to any, but I think my brothers have, for the different camps. But other than that, Pā'ia was very small and quaint. Small town. Nice market. Vegetables grown in our backyard. And if we didn't have (something), the Filipinos down the road would give us all kinds of goodies. But it was a very pleasant life.

IH: How long did you live there?

ML: We were there about three years. And then, my dad got a new house from the pineapple people. I thought it was just the most elegant (house). I thought, "Gee, picture windows." Because in our old homes, we just had screens with wooden things that would close at night to keep (the) bugs out.

IH: You didn't have any glass in your house?

ML: There was no glass, just screens, and then these wooden things that you would close up at night if it rained. It was quite primitive, but it was comfortable. Old but very clean. And then, when we moved into this new home my dad got through the plantation, we had windows. I thought, "Gee, picture windows, wonderful." I thought that was the biggest home there was. (We) went back about eight years ago for a family reunion we had in Maui, and all of my dreams collapsed, because it wasn't as nice as I recalled. It's funny how you think something is so big when you're seven (or) eight years old. But (we) went back and it was just totally different.

IH: But the house is still standing?

ML: Yes, it was.

IH: Is that in Pā'ia, also?

ML: Yes, it's in Pā'ia, and it's one of those that (they) haven't torn down yet. But the neighboring homes were almost all gone. The big Pā'ia gym was still standing. The hospital in Pā'ia was torn down. I could visualize all of these buildings as a child.

IH: Did they have a Pā'ia School?

ML: Yes, there was. Pā'ia Elementary and [Maui] High, which included, I think, the intermediate, I'm not sure. But it was quite a walk away from our home. But with a whole bunch of kids, it was fun. If we had any money, we could stop at this crack seed store on the way home from school and buy two cents' worth of whatever you could afford and split it with all your friends. The Japanese girls always had money for some strange reason. I can't (chuckles) understand that, but anyway, they always had money. It was a nice time. We were poor, but it wasn't where we were lacking anything. What we had was enough. You know, what my parents could bring home. My mother worked in the cannery, and in her gloves she would bring home cores for us for dessert. You're not supposed to have those.

IH: What is that?

ML: Cores from the pineapple, the centers. She'd stick all the cores in her fingers of the glove and bring them home to us. That was quite a treat because she wasn't able to do that all the time. But when she (did), it was a treat for us.

IH: Why weren't they allowed to bring those home?

ML: I couldn't say. It seemed as though the workers had to sneak them out. Maybe they made juices with it, I don't know. But it was nice to have something different other than figs from the backyard or gandule beans that we would pick and boil. It was just different. I don't recall feeling poor. I know we were lacking a lot, but our parents made up for all of these things. Homemade dresses. Outfits that were made out of flour sacks, panties, that kept for years. Never had pukas in 'em. (Chuckles)

IH: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

ML: I have (three) brothers. (Three) older brothers and myself. I think life was harder for them. I'm the youngest in the family. Being that my two older brothers are quite a few years older than I, I think life was harder for them. They more or less had to oversee me, and clean (the) house, and do things where I didn't. I could go out to play. They were policed by my parents, which was good discipline. But still, I don't feel my brothers had as good a life as I recall. Eventually, they both went to go work in the sugar cane fields. That was backbreaking. I forget, I don't know what the pay was, but my two brothers had a harder time than I.

Our only outings in Maui, when my father finally acquired a car--my maternal grandparents lived in Kula, and my paternal grandparents lived in Keāhua, which is gone now. Oh, it was a big thing for us to jump in the car and head off to Keāhua or Kula, which we didn't do often because my parents couldn't afford all that much for gasoline.

IH: Where was Keāhua located?

ML: Keāhua was---I wish I could say if it was off Hāmākua Poko. And to spell that, I wouldn't know how. Hāmākua Poko is still there, but Keāhua was off of there, if I recall correctly. It was a pleasant time to go visit my tūtū lady and my tūtū man because they had a bunch of kids. My uncles and aunts would number, I would say, fourteen or fifteen. My tūtū man would sometimes kill a couple of four or five chickens. My tūtū lady would cook. (The) kids would pull up all of my tūtū man's onions. They were the red-type onions. Green stalks but they had red bulbs. As kids, we were naughty, I guess.

IH: What do they call those?

ML: I don't know what it was called. But I recall going in his beautiful garden, very cultured. He was a small man, very dark.

IH: Was he Hawaiian?

ML: Yes. We would just go and pull all of his onions. Boy, he'd yell at us in Hawaiian. I never understood what he said. But other



times, my tūtū lady would run down the front steps and give us licking because we deserved it. She had mango trees galore in her yard. Big area. It seems that if you were the favorite mo'opuna, she would give you a certain mango. Some of the old folks were strange. I can't say I was one of her pets. My brother was, though. He was the only one that could have this certain mango. As kids, my parents taught us not to be envious of each other, but I still was because my brother wouldn't share. (Chuckles)

IH: Those are your paternal grandparents?

ML: Yes, on my father's side.

IH: What did they do for a living?

ML: My grandfather worked for the plantation, also, in Keāhua. He injured himself. And so, I guess he was laid off for his injuries. He was compensated slightly, but they lived off whatever he raised in the gardens. Along with his pigs, chickens, he had a couple of cows. My tūtū lady was just the overseer of everything. She was a big woman.

IH: What were their names?

ML: Kalani.

IH: That's their last name, Kalani?

ML: Yes. Kalani was the last name. They spoke Hawaiian. It was strange. They never encouraged us to speak or to answer them in Hawaiian. We would answer them in English and we were never scolded.

IH: Did your parents speak Hawaiian at all?

ML: Both my parents did, yes. But they did not speak it to us. Only a few words they'd use that we understood and we still do today. But when they wanted to talk about something, I guess, other than us knowing about it, they would speak in Hawaiian. But to (speak) to us in Hawaiian, no, they never did. It was always in English. We would sing Hawaiian songs at home, but that's the extent of it. I'm very sorry about that today. I've lost something, and I think along the way I was cheated because I was not able to retain this from my grandparents and my parents.

But our trips to Kula, I guess my father didn't care for his in-laws all that much. So, we'd catch the mail truck, my mom and I. We'd go visit, with the mailman. He'd drop us off in Kula, and then we'd spend several hours with my tūtū lady. It was a wonderful outing whenever we had an occasion to do that. She was quite elderly. She was Tūtū Poepoe. But she was a very gracious lady. Avocadoes, tangerines, loquats, all kinds of fruit trees. We'd come home after she'd go in her garden and dig sweet potatoes for us to dry a couple of days, and then for us to take home and eat. I vaguely recall her

because she died shortly after. I guess I was six or seven, and she passed on. But she raised my older brother. He stayed with my tūtū lady until he was nine. And then, he came home with us to Pā'ia. But the reason he stayed with my tūtū was because she was quite ill. He went to school in Kula. So, we would go visit him. It was (a) hard time for my mother because she really didn't want to part with her oldest child, but the hānai system was still in effect. It was quite strong, so my brother stayed with my Tūtū Poepoe. We'd go back home, and she'd be crying all the way home. It (was) very hard for her to part with her child. You see, my mother was hānai by this Tūtū Poepoe. I have an uncle that was hānaied by this Tūtū Poepoe, also, and an aunt that was hānaied to her. She had three children. My mother, my uncle, and Auntie Sally. The girls married and my uncle went off to college. So, there was no one to stay home with my tūtū, so my older brother did.

IH: Do you know why she hānaied your mother and the other two?

ML: Well, yes. My uncle and my mother was hānaied because their mom left them with her husband. They were divorced (or) separated. So, they were left with their father who was Chong-yet. Ah Fong Chong-yet was his name. They were more or less given from my ah kung to Tūtū Poepoe, my Uncle Henry and my mom. Auntie Sally, I don't know where she came from, but there were no blood relations. So, they took to Tūtū Poepoe more than they did their own mother (because) they didn't know her. Of course, my ah kung worked for the Pu'unēnē mill. As years went on, we were told that he was one of those that helped build the mill. Like most of the Chinese, I presume he came from Canton. But we used to like to visit him. He'd give us silver coins. And there (were) a couple of times he gave my brothers some gold ones. I don't know whatever happened to them. (Chuckles) I wish we had them today. But he was a very nice Chinese man, quite tall.

IH: So, he would be your. . . .

ML: My mother's dad.

IH: Your mother's--your real grandfather.

ML: Yes. My grandmother came from Waimea. The story goes--my Uncle Henry (who) just passed on three years ago--while he was in college, he attended Brigham Young [University]. He was Henry Ah Fong. It was not popular at the time, the late '30s, to be Chinese. So, he came home and he took his grandmother's maiden name, which was Lindsey. He found life to be much easier for him in college years after. He started the family genealogy which is very popular today. My Uncle Henry was always at birthday parties, funerals, weddings, gathering all kinds of information. We were not interested. But today, I think it's one of the greatest things (he left as a legacy to us).

IH: Oh, (yes). Everybody's doing it.

ML: A legacy that's just wonderful. The Lindseys are a big group of people. I give (them) a lot of credit for taking the time to give us this legacy. I'm very proud of that. But he owned a lot of property in Kula that was left to him by my Tūtū Keawe, my tūtū man. It is presently one of the nicer areas of Kula. As we understood (it), he sold quite a bit of it and the reason he did was he had very bad kidneys. He sold off his properties to get his own dialysis machine. He taught at Brigham Young [University], at Lā'ie. He was very sickly towards the end and he's since died. But we never really got to know that uncle all that well (because) he was very reserved. Very intelligent man. But he and my mom were raised by this Tūtū Poepoe. She was left property, also, my mother was. It wasn't as nice, from what I've been told, as my uncle's.

IH: You folks still have that property?

ML: No, it was given to my brother, and he's since sold (it), which I think he regrets. But at the time, I'm sure my brother needed the money, so he sold it. It was quite a few acres. I think it was eight acres, I'm not all that sure.

But life in Maui was quite nice. It was country. Relatives in Lahaina. Fleming's Beach. And that's all there was in Lahaina. We never knew of Ka'anapali and all of these other areas that's so fancy now. It was Olowalu, and Lahaina, and Fleming's Beach, and that's all we knew. I never realized they could come out with so many fancy areas. But Maui was nice, it was country. Having gone back several times since, it's not country anymore. I guess it's good for the people. I don't care for it. I guess (because) I come from there.

Kind of lost the dream I had once of going to Kīhei, and there was nothing in Kīhei. We'd go for (family) picnics (and) school picnics. All I remember of Kīhei was kiaue trees. But now, it's full of hotels and condominiums. But my parents would go down there, and we'd make salt. They would make salt down Kīhei. There were salt beds there. It was true in our case where I've heard people just go with a bowl of poi. It was true in our case. We would just go with a bowl of poi and that was it. My mother would make crab, and my dad would get 'opihi. And my tūtūs would make poke. If anything, they would take the poi, the onion, and the chili pepper. The salt was there. Everything else was from the ocean.

IH: Do you remember how they made their salt?

ML: No, I don't. I recall the salt beds. But no, I wasn't interested. It was just playing. It was fun for me just to go out and play. But I recall seeing the salt beds. But other than that, I have no more memories of Maui being Maui.

IH: So then, why did your parents move from there?

ML: Well, my father was in the National Guard on Maui for a while. Then he joined the regular army.

IH: Was he still working at the plantation at the same time?

ML: He had just. . . . I'm kind of vague on that. I'm not sure if he was still with the plantation or if he quit completely. And so, he liked the idea of the military life, so he joined the regular army, and he was shipped to Honolulu. So, we were to follow. But I think because he enjoyed the military life so much, the absence was just too long for my parents. They soon divorced.

IH: Oh, you folks didn't go with him?

ML: No, we did not. We stayed back in Maui. My mother continued working. They separated and they divorced finally. While she came to Honolulu to look for work, we were staying with an uncle in Wailuku, my two brothers and myself at Pūhala Village. It's just outside of Happy Valley. I guess Pūhala Village is considered Happy Valley, also. But there, my brothers really went out in the sugar cane fields, and hō hana (hoe hana). I was attending 'Iao Elementary School. It was traumatic for us kids at the time because we were very parent-oriented and not having our parents with us. All of my mother's worldly possessions, her kapas and the family Bible, at that point, that's where everything was given away. All of our kapas was also possibly given away or misplaced. But then, she didn't consider. . . . The kapas were important to her, but the family Bible, I think, was more important to her because it had dates where her grandmother was born, dates of family marriages, deaths, that went back years and years. It was a Bible that was very old, and to her that was more precious than the material wealth.

IH: What religion was she?

ML: My mother was Mormon. I am, too.

IH: (Yes), that's very important, to have family records.

ML: Yes. And so, she was very disappointed that of all the things she lost, that was the one item she wasn't able to get back. But there were several years later that my brother Jimmy and I went back to Maui to my uncle's and we got the family Bible back. I asked my aunt at the time if I could have it, because it didn't pertain to her side of the family, it was my mother's side. She wasn't too pleased. She says, "Well, no, I don't think you should have it, because it's better off here." And I'm sorry to say, I took it. When we left, I took it anyway because it belonged to my mother. When I got back to Honolulu, I told her I actually stole it. "But it's yours," it's not my aunt's. "It's yours."

She scolded me for stealing it. "But actually," she says, "you didn't steal it. It was ours. It's back where it belongs."

She was so happy. For years thereafter, she did nothing but look at this Bible. Go back and look at dates. It was good for us because at the time, we remembered where Tūtū Poepoe was born, and Uncle So-and-so came from. Today, my brother has the Bible, so it's still within the family. It's very precious to us.

But Maui, we left Maui right after the war [World War II].

IH: How long were you in Maui without your parents?

ML: I would say about, oh, two years.

IH: Oh, that's quite a while. Did you realize the separation of your parents?

ML: Oh, yes.

IH: Was that a common thing in those days? Divorce and separation?

ML: Very uncommon. It wasn't common in those days. Not like it is today. Actually, it was a shameful thing to do, I suppose. My father wasn't condemned; my mom was, though. She was the one that was condemned for it. But we didn't think she should be condemned, because my dad was a little flirt. He liked women.

IH: So, why do you think she was condemned?

ML: Oh, (because) it wasn't popular to be divorced. It was frowned upon. No matter what your husband does, you should (stay by) him, which is foolish. But she came to Honolulu and looked for a job. Then we finally came over here. In the meantime, we were at my uncle's place in Wailuku, and we were up in Makawao, another place. My brother was driving the school bus in Makawao. He did that for a while. He couldn't stand a plantation, hō hana (hoe hana)-type work. And then, eventually, we came over to Honolulu.

IH: Was your mother working when you folks came over?

ML: Yes, she worked at the Territorial Hospital at the time and she did for years to come.

IH: Is that what's now Kāne'ohe State Hospital?

ML: Yes. What's considered, quote, "pupule house."

IH: (Yes), that's what everybody used to call it.

(Laughter)

ML: Yes. She worked there for a number of years. So, we all came to Honolulu because of her job.

IH: Then when you moved here, where did you live?



ML: We were on Lusitana Street in an apartment. And then, my mother remarried.

IH: You folks lived in an apartment when you moved here?

ML: Yes.

IH: Oh, how was that? From the country to an apartment?

ML: Claustrophobia. It was very hard because it was just a two-bedroom thing, and a small little kitchen.

IH: No yard?

ML: No. It was shabby. It was very shabby. But we lived there for a number of years. Oh, I'd say about three years. Then we moved to Kaimukī, Second Avenue. The area was very nice. My stepfather was with the prison, O'ahu Prison, at the time.

IH: So, did your mother remarry before you moved here?

ML: No. My mother remarried shortly after we got here.

IH: How was she commuting to work over the Pali?

ML: She worked at the hospital and they had buses that would bus the workers out to Kāne'ohe. It was the Old Pali Road. She'd leave, say, 6:00 in the morning and get home at 3:30. She enjoyed her work. She liked it. I never got to see what it was like. A couple of times I did visit. After that, I never wanted to visit again.

(Laughter)

ML: But the patients there, some of (them), were not all that insane. I think, in those days, people were put in there that didn't necessarily have to be insane. There were alcoholics, (drug addicts, etc.). But the majority was for the insane. Then shortly after that, we moved to Kaimukī. And my stepfather and his sister got involved in the lei business.

IH: What were their names?

ML: My aunt was Gladys Chung. And my stepfather was Edward La'anui. They were both from Maui. They started this business together, if I recall correctly. And then, he branched off to his own. He started his own business lei selling, also.

IH: Do you know where their first stands were located?

ML: They were on Lagoon Drive [ca. 1946], on the road, with old trucks. It was a hard time then. But we have progressed till today.

IH: So, they didn't sell leis down at the waterfront before that?



ML: My father did not, and neither did my aunt. They didn't know a thing about lei selling. I guess they saw other people on the road and decided, "Well, this looks like an interesting business." So they started off green. They had no experience. Maybe my aunt knew something about lei making, and my stepfather had the business smarts, but I don't really think they knew all that much about lei stringing. And no, we never went to the boats. That was not my forte, anyway. There was an attempt on my stepfather's part to send me to the boats one day. It was the Lurline. Those old-time lei sellers that sold leis at the boats, they were rough. They were not for a little kid to try and budge.

IH: How old were you when you went down there?

ML: I was twelve. I think I was twelve years old. Anyway, he sent me off to the Lurline with a basketful of leis and told me, "Go sell leis." And he (left). He didn't stay around to help me. I didn't know the first thing about lei selling. The old-time lei sellers was no match for me because I went back whitewashed. It was most embarrassing. (Chuckles)

But I used to go back home to Maui. My mother would send me back home for summers prior to lei selling. And those were fun times. I'd go visit my uncle and my aunts. We'd go back on the Hualālai and Wai'ale'ale. The lei sellers there were very colorful. I never suspected we would get in that type of business. But the lei business has been very good.

IH: So when you first moved here, what school did you attend?

ML: I was at Royal School. That was from, I think, grade four.

IH: Was it hard adjusting to the new school?

ML: Yes, it was hard to adjust. But it was only because I was so much younger than my brothers and very protected. To be thrown into a new environment, I wasn't ready for that. But I was there just for a short while, and then we moved to Kaimukī, and I attended Ali'iolani School. I rather enjoyed that. I liked Ali'iolani School. From there, we went on to Stevenson [Intermediate School]. It was always the same group of kids. And then on to Roosevelt [High School]. So, friendships can go back from grade school.

IH: What grade were you when you started going down to the lei stand?

ML: Off and on, it was, oh, if I recall correctly, I think it was the sixth grade. I would have been twelve years old when I started to go down. Eleven or twelve. But I thought it was a treat.

IH: Oh, yeah?

ML: Yes. I thought, "Oh, this is wonderful." But I found out different eventually. It was hard work. It wasn't such a treat because the

old folks really made you work. If anything, I think we were very disciplined as to how we performed. Everything was business, no playing.

(Interview interrupted, then resumes.)

ML: But I worked out of fear. I worked for my stepfather out of fear. I feared him. (Chuckles) And so, I was taught to work.

IH: Did you do the stringing or did you do the selling?

ML: We strung and sold.

IH: Even at that young age, you were selling?

ML: Oh, yes. In fact, I was considered old. There were people down at the lei stands on Lagoon Drive that sold and strung leis from (a younger age). If they could hold the needle and pick up a flower, they would start stringing.

(Interview interrupted, then resumes.)

ML: But anyway, where were we, 'Iwalani?

IH: On Lagoon Drive, in the car, in the truck. What did your truck look like, the truck stand?

ML: Ugly. My stepfather had it built especially for us to rest. It was like a lunch wagon. A tall deally, square. As I recall, it was gray in color. It had a window where you could push out on the side to let in ventilation. The stand was on the back side of it. But it was a rest area, where if you got tired, you could go in and rest. Well, I couldn't get tired and my mother couldn't get tired. But he got tired often, and he was in there resting, not us.

(Laughter)

ML: He was always resting. Now that I think back, those trucks were ugly, but boy, were they quaint. They all had personality. They were big, little trucks. Black, gray, brown, green, you name them.

IH: So, you had your flowers hanging on the back of the truck?

ML: Yes, there was a lei stand that was in back of the truck.

IH: Did you folks have refrigeration or anything? Icebox . . .

ML: We had iceboxes.

IH: Did you bring your own ice or did you have an iceman come and deliver?

ML: For the beginning, my stepfather would bring in his own ice. But then, eventually, we had a regular iceman come down and fill our

iceboxes every other day, I think it was. But yes, the leis would hang out with all the elements--wind, rain, mud. But those trucks, like I said, they looked ugly then, and still in my mind they look ugly, but on second thought, they weren't ugly. It was part of Hawai'i. In my mind's eye, it's a beautiful sight. Not too many people have pictures of it, and I wished we did. We never had the foresight to take pictures, you know. I guess at the time, they thought, "Why take a picture of that rundown old truck? It looks so ugly." I'm sure a lot of tourists did, but we never did. But now that I think of it, it (was) a beautiful sight.

IH: Where was it located on Lagoon Drive?

ML: Well, there were three trucks ahead of us, and we were number four in line. We were pretty close to the corner of the block of Lagoon. I think where the bank is now, which is the Bank of. . . .

IH: First National [Hawai'i National Bank, 540 Lagoon Drive], right . . .

ML: (Hawai'i National Bank. I hardly ever drive on) Lagoon Drive anymore. It's not the same.

IH: Was that a business area that you folks were in or was that a residential area?

ML: It was a residential area. There was a used-car business a block before, but it was a residential area in Damon Tract. This is where we had our truck doing business. But to begin with, there was a man down there. His name was Gus Kalili. He wasn't on a truck to begin with. He was where they posted a sentry during the war going towards the old airport. There was a building there, and he used to sell his leis out of this sentry-type building. If there ever was a gracious man, it was Gus Kalili. He was a very nice man. Soft-spoken, mild-mannered, a gracious Hawaiian man. As a lei seller, he just gave out nothing but aloha. I have very fond memories of this man. As I recall, he was one of the first to start on Lagoon Drive. And then, I guess, eventually, he got a truck; and the rest of his family did, too. But they were old-time lei sellers. And so, we were the interlopers, newcomers who didn't know a thing about selling leis, my stepfather and his sister.

IH: Did they help you? This family that was there first? The Kalili's?

ML: Well, Gus Kalili, yes, I think helped my stepfather quite a bit, and my aunt. But in those days, naturally, you (didn't) want competition. You know, the less competition the better. So, I presume there was quite a few arguments. But this man, no, he helped my stepfather and aunt start business, and my mother, also. He couldn't do enough. I think in his mind--he never said it, but in his mind he was thinking, "There's enough money for everybody here. So, come and set up your business." He helped my parents gather flowers and get different names of growers. He was a tremendous help to them, yes. Very kindly. That's the reason I don't think I'll ever forget this man.

END OF SIDE ONE

SIDE TWO

IH: So, who were your customers when you were on the trucks on Lagoon Drive?

ML: Well, some of us had regular customers, but majority of them would just be people that needed leis. They drive up in their cars alongside of our trucks.

IH: Were they local people or were they tourists?

ML: The majority of buyers then were locals. Tourism wasn't quite popular then, although it was definitely starting. But it was more of the locals that bought our flowers. It was funny, and it still is, but on the trucks we were separated maybe by ten, eleven, twelve feet. If you were lucky enough and you had the bigger smile, you would have the customer come and stop at your place and buy your leis. But it was just catch as (catch can.) You got your customers if you were lucky.

IH: Did you have military customers?

ML: We had a lot of military people. After the war, they were still here. But still, I say the majority of our business came from the locals. The military plane would come in every afternoon, oh, 3:00, 3:30, and that's when we had the majority of our business would be the military people then. But shortly after that, United Airlines started up and that's when tourism really blossomed.

IH: Do you know what year they started, United Airlines?

ML: I'd be guessing, but I would say in the latter part of 1946 (or 1948).

IH: So, you folks were out there already?

ML: We were out in Lagoon Drive still on our trucks. Of course, Pan Am was here already, but United started up in 1946 or (1948).

IH: Would you say that's when tourism really picked up?

ML: I would say it bloomed. It started in the '50s. That's when, in my mind, that tourism really came into Hawai'i was '49, '50, '51.

IH: Did that affect your business?

ML: We were busy. We were very busy.

IH: But could you actually notice the increase in business when tourism picked up?

ML: Oh, yes, absolutely. It was good time to sell leis. I didn't mind working because my parents were busy, and we were all busy. The monies were good. But I would think that would be the year where tourism blossomed, yes. There were different airlines eventually that came in. Trans-Ocean, Northwest. At the time, Aloha Airlines was called TWA. They were at the main terminal along with Hawaiian [Airlines]. And then the different airlines started to come in after United and--well, Pan Am first, and then United came in.

It was such a wonderful atmosphere at the old airport. The old cliché, it was so full of aloha spirit. It was even more than that. It wasn't just the aloha spirit, it was the people. It was more than the aloha spirit. I can see it, but I can't express to you how beautiful this old shack of an airport was. I wish we still had this old airport today with our freeways. I mean, if anything, we sold down the river our aloha spirit. But if we had all of our brand-new freeways today and our old airport, this big building with a quonset hut on the side, God, we'd be typical. We'd be authentic. (Chuckles) It's too bad we had to move on to bigger and better things. But selling leis in those days were fun (and uninhibited).

IH: When you were still on the trucks, did you have to go out and pick your own flowers or were you buying all from growers?

ML: My parents would, every morning, go down to Kekaulike Street and gather [buy] whatever flowers they needed--carnations, tuberose. Orchids, we would pick up from TWA or Hawaiian Airlines. It would come in from Hilo. Plumerias, my parents would buy on the way up from Kāne'ohe.

(Telephone rings. Interview stops, then resumes.)

IH: I don't think you said what year you folks went down on Lagoon Drive. Do you remember what year that was?

ML: I would think, guessing again, it would be in the year 1946. It would be the latter part, I think, 1946.

IH: And then, about how many years were you folks on the truck before you went into that grass shack?

ML: It was from '46 to 1950 that we were invited into the grass huts on Lagoon Drive.

IH: In 1950?

ML: Yes, 1950, yes.

IH: And you said you were invited?

ML: We were asked in or my parents along with other leis sellers were asked in by the state [territory] or they called themselves Civil



Aeronautics Board at the time. They were invited in. The old folks were told, "We'll take you off the road, build grass huts for you, and it'll be pleasant surroundings to sell leis." And that was the reason we got off of Lagoon Drive (and) the trucks.

IH: Do you know why they asked you folks to go there?

ML: I guess we were a blight. Maybe the state [territory] was getting to the point where we should not be a blight. It was quite dangerous at the time the state [territory] was building up, where cars would stop and we would create traffic jams. May Day, graduations, it was quite busy. So, they thought, if we had our own areas with bigger parking facilities we could create less hazardous problems. But it was very nice. I liked the grass huts. Well, they were uniform. It was very nice. But it made for competition even worse, because maybe at the time on Lagoon Drive there was, oh, maybe ten, eleven trucks. They expanded to fifteen leis stands. They made it up fifteen lei stands, and so there were other lei sellers that were invited in. So, competition was keen. But there was enough business, at times, for people. And then, again, when it was slow, well, it was very hard. But other than that, lei selling was good on the grass huts. But the CAB [Civil Aeronautics Board] was very good to protect us, per se.

IH: Were you still in school when you folks moved into the grass huts?

ML: Yes. I was in high school.

IH: Did you go down after school to help?

ML: When we were on the trucks, my stepfather bought me a car, an old Model-A, with a rumble seat for thirty-five dollars. And that was to get to work early in the morning, and then (get) to school by 8:15. School ended at 3:00, and I had better be back at that airport at 3:15 to sell leis. There was no such thing as being able to go have a cherry Coke with your friends. It was work. But it was good (training). Because I didn't think it was good at the time, but it was good for discipline. If anything, my stepfather taught me to work. I thought he was the meanest thing on this earth, but now I understand that he really wanted to teach me to work.

As lei seller at the airport, I must say you'll never see more Hawaiians congregating in one business area as we have at the airport presently. We're [Hawaiians] not known to be workers, but owners are there early in the morning until very late at night. We may not be out front selling leis, but we still own our businesses and, I think, run it efficiently, too.

But Lagoon Drive in the '50s was good business. The grass huts was very good business. The rent was very small.

IH: How much was the rent?



ML: At the time, it was twenty dollars a month. It was a breeze to pay. It was so mere. Shortly after that, my stepfather passed away and my mother ran the business. It was called Eddie and Alice's. It was a very good business. She found that she couldn't work at the State [Territorial] Hospital versus the lei stand, so she (left) her job at the hospital.

IH: She didn't quit her job at the hospital until your father had passed away?

ML: Yes. But no, she (left) when he passed away because she found it was (difficult).

IH: Oh. What year was this?

ML: This would have been '52, I think, she (left) her job. [Nineteen] fifty-one or '52.

IH: Did your father's sister still have the lei stand?

ML: Yes, she had her own business.

IH: Was that Gladys?

ML: (Yes.) Gladys Lei Stand.

IH: Is that the same Gladys Lei Stand that's there now?

ML: No. Presently, it's run by someone else.

IH: But it's that same stand?

ML: (Yes.)

IH: And the same name?

ML: (Yes.) Most of us retained the same names from the old Lagoon Drive, the trucks. But I changed my business name to Maile's. It was really unique because for a long while I never gave it (much) thought, but it was where I was the only one with a Hawaiian name.

IH: Oh, yeah.

ML: I never gave it much thought until very much later. Other people would say, "Well, gee, you know, you're the only one with a Hawaiian name."

And I thought, "(Yes), that's true."

I would feel that in the future, if (anyone) else (would) change their name of the lei stand, if they'd like, they should try Hawaiian. But it was most interesting when it was posed to me.

IH: That's true. I've never really thought of that, either. Well, all the lei stands were just named after the owners, right?

ML: (Yes.)

IH: Well, in those days, the Hawaiians only used their middle names as Hawaiian names.

ML: Yes.

IH: The first names were all English names.

ML: They were. I'm trying to recall now on Lagoon Drive if we had any Hawaiian names then. We didn't. Because number one was Harriet's or Hattie's [Serrao]. Number two was Sophia's [Ventura]. Number three was Dorothy's [Onaga]. Number four was Eddie and Alice [La'anui]. Number five was Emma's [Keli'i]. Number six was Almar's [Napu'elua]. Number seven was Arthur's [Hew Len]. And number eight was Lily's [Kahaulelio], if I recall right. Number nine was Gladys [Chung]. And Irene's [Sims]. But anything past Emma's, I can't really say (it would be) correct. Because (I wasn't) allowed to (visit) the neighbors.

IH: Oh, yeah?

ML: Not on the trucks, no. (Because) we were younger and you (were to) just mind your own business.

IH: So, you didn't really associate with the kids of the other stands, either?

ML: Oh, well, there was the Serrao kids and there was the Ventura kids, (yes), I knew them. And then, there were Gladys Chung's. That was about the only kids. Almar's kids were really quite small. But our age group would be that family, my age group. Oh, we had fun. But as far as playing and associating, no, (I) couldn't. You had to sit and string and mind business, and go to school and come home. It was strictly business. We were oriented just to work.

IH: Did you folks bring your own food down there to eat?

ML: Oh, yes. My parents would stop at any drive-in and bring dinners or cook at home and bring it down. But there was no cooking per se on Lagoon Drive. It was a hard life. We couldn't go to a bathroom.

IH: Yeah, what did you do?

ML: The kiawe bushes were always there. (Chuckles) That was--I don't know if you'd say fun. Today, it's fun when you think of how primitive we were. But the atmosphere was very friendly, I thought. Maybe the older folks, they were competitive and jealous of each other, but as the younger ones, no, I never had this attitude. It

was our own age group, I think, we all really enjoyed each other's company when we had time to.

IH: Did most of those children end up going into the lei business, taking over their parents' business?

ML: Yes. We more or less all inherited our family businesses. I did when my parents passed away. I was left this legacy, which I'm very happy to say I have. We promote the aloha spirit, we get to live comfortably, educate our (children). They left us a (great legacy). A lot of times I dislike it, but I think it's normal. When you have done something every day for forty years, it gets boring. But it's (a) good enough living. It has its ups and downs to be in business for yourself. But when it's slow, you're your own boss. It compensates for the boredom sometimes.

IH: When did you folks start hiring outside help? I notice now almost all the stands have hired workers.

ML: Well, my mother first hired outside help, I would say, in 1952 when she left her job at the hospital and found she was devoting sixteen, eighteen hours a day of working at the airport at the grass huts. Then she found that she could use outside help. That's when she started to hire. But see, in those days, it was all cash. You know, there was no such thing as payroll. It wasn't as strict. And so, when I took over the business I needed help so I would hire people. And I still do presently.

IH: Now, you folks have mostly Filipino workers. Everybody says that they're good workers. Was it that way before, also?

ML: No, there was a time where we would look for the local people to work. But my mother ran into problems where they always (would) have excuses. "My children are sick today," or some excuse. And so, it was very difficult holding on to local people, females, to work for you. Some of (them) were dedicated, but very few. We got to the point where we were looking for dedicated people that you knew would open your business when they were supposed to and close when they were supposed to. We found that the Filipino girls were excellent in this.

A few people have come down to tell us, "Well, gee, where's the Hawaiians?" And that's sad. But at this point in my life, after doing this for forty years, I'm tired. I'm very tired. (I'd) rather hire someone to go out and sell my leis for me. Although I'm there, but you just get tired. People are different today. It's not like selling leis in the past. If I was to go sell leis for the day, they would buy two and you (would) give (them) a couple free (flower leis). But today, everything is so different. I guess we've lost it on our own. We've allowed it to get lost. And then, too, costs are very high. So, it's not as it was in the '40s, '50s, '60s.

IH: It was more enjoyable then?

ML: Much, much more. I enjoyed it much more. Today, it's a business. It's run as a business. But there's something to say about this lackadaisical attitude, you know. We just gave off more aloha spirit. We just cared a little bit more then than we do today. Today, it's a little tough doing business on state property. Even though they did tell us, "Well, come, you lei sellers. We'll protect you and build you new areas." It's not the same. It's regimentated and "You do as I say, otherwise you don't do." It's not a very pleasant area to work in when you have authority that's always frowning on a lot of things you do. Some of us do wrong, but you could say they're really nitpickers. I basically feel that we're a thorn in their sides. And yet, to the very end, I would fight them. I really would. This is our culture. This is really one of the last things that is Hawaiian. When we need to, we do get together. We are a unit. We (bind) together. When we have problems, we face it totally. So, I'm very happy to say that if anything was really to get in our way, we'd have a bunch of Hawaiians that would bind together. Because we've been doing this (for) a long time. I have, and there's people before me that's been doing it even longer. I've got too much to lose. But it's a good business.

IH: Has the lei business always been strictly Hawaiian? Do you know in the past if there were other types of people that would come into the business? Like Chinese or . . .

ML: In the past, it's always been Hawaiians. But to the present day now, I see all kinds of people. We've had Chinese, yes. The mixed groups. Samoans, Vietnamese sell leis. But basically, it was a Hawaiian custom.

IH: At the airport today, aren't all the owners still Hawaiians?

ML: The lei sellers at the airport today, yes, are all Hawaiians. We started off as all Hawaiians. Maybe you will find one presently that is not, but we all started, yes, strong Hawaiians.

IH: That's unusual to me that so many Hawaiians would get together on a business. Well, they don't get together, but to all be in business, you know. For Hawaiians, it's unusual.

ML: Yes, we've been considered as an unusual group.

IH: Yeah, it's unique, I think, to Hawaiians.

ML: To run our own businesses for years and years, and still maintain ourselves, and still be in business.

IH: Right, for so many years.

ML: Yes. I don't know of another group.

IH: It is. It's unique. In the Hawaiian community, I think it is unique.

ML: I wouldn't be able to recall another group of Hawaiians that has been in business and have stayed in business for a number of years. I know of a few groups that started up and they have not continued. But our group, no. We're fifteen strong. Or I'm sorry to say, not fifteen, (only twelve).

IH: Now, twelve.

ML: It's twelve, yes.

IH: What was it like at the last stand you were at--the wooden building?

ML: Business, to begin with, that was. . . . We moved there, I think, it was 1962, '63. In the beginning, it was fair. It was a matter of the people getting used to the lei stands, at least where we were positioned. But business at the time, in the '60s, was still pretty good. But they changed the roads on us. There was a main drive where you get into the parking area. You couldn't pass us. You'd have to go past us, in front of us. We were visible. But then, they closed that road off and they went alongside. They opened a road alongside of us. And so, the public had a time figuring out how to get into the lei stands and get back out. So, it was a matter of a learning process all over again.

(Telephone rings. Interview interrupted, then resumes.)

ML: But business towards the '70s, I guess the recession hurt us. So, it wasn't all that great.

(Interview stops, then resumes.)

IH: We were talking about the wooden building. The business there . . .

ML: Oh, yes. They closed the road on us, and the recession had hit us. So, it took the public a little while to get used to know how to get into the lei stands and get back out. But we suffered from that loss of business. And no, the building itself was not the best built. What separated all of us as neighbors was just a thin little wall. It wasn't the best built place to sell leis. We were all just bunched together. Competition at its keenest. It was not the best area to sell. And we were used to having more space between us versus this thin wall that separated us.

IH: When they had the grass shacks, were they separate buildings?

ML: Yes, we were individual grass huts. At least you had some space, whereas in '63 when they moved us, there was just a wall. But then now that we're into our new areas, which is since 1978, I think, now these areas there's room. I guess they have no more plans to move us. I wouldn't know where they would move us. But this freeway



right in back of us [new ramp going straight to overseas departure], I mean, if we're a thorn in their sides, God, they're letting us know. This freeway is just literally going to kill us, although they'll have signs--lei stands on the right and freeway straight ahead to the airport. But how many people are going to take the time to stop and buy leis when they know they have to get off? Quite a few of the people that buy leis from us are in a hurry. They have no time to waste. So, it'll take another few years, possibly, for the public to know how to get to us and get back to the airport. But it gets very depressing when it's (a 50 percent loss). My feelings are that they're trying to cut us off at the pass again. I just don't know what to think.

IH: Why do you think if they asked you folks--of course, was quite a while ago that they asked you to come onto their property. But now, you folks feel like that they're trying to maybe give you hassles or make it hard for you to run your business there. Why do you think the change in attitude? Do you think it's because of the different personnel, or it's a change in the Department [of Transportation], or how do you feel about that?

ML: It's a change in the department, politics. Years and years back, there were people that were interested in possibly bidding for our lei stands. There is no such bidding process. It's a cultural thing. It's just handed down from one member of the family to the next. But the politics today is severe. I think we're just the roses amongst the thorns and they want to get rid of us. This is my feeling. It's not (just) in my mind (or) I'm imagining it. I've seen it happen over a period of years. Yes, I would say right now they'd love to get rid of us. But not without a fight, they won't. And yet, there are some politicians that's very favorable towards us. But the majority maybe, to be fair, I would have to say, maybe they're not aware of some of the problems that we go through. Maybe that's where the ignorance comes in. And communication is possibly bad. But I find today where, hey, put me back on Lagoon Drive and give me my same truck, and I would go back there. But I didn't ask to be taken off, so, protect me. Some people may be happy with their lot, but a lot of people are unhappy.

IH: How is the relationship amongst the lei sellers today?

ML: From an average of poor to excellent, in between. It's a business and it's as it should be. It should be run as a business. Competition is keen. Also, luck plays a lot in this. If you're lucky today, you'll make money. But tourism in Hawai'i, I think, has been going down. The local attitudes are different from the '50s. But it's still a good living if you mind the store. Not to get rich, but it's a living. But it was more fun before, like everything else.

IH: Did you folks used to socialize amongst the lei sellers?

ML: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. We'd have parties. In the '70s, especially. It was a fun time. We were a very thick group. But maybe 'cause we're



getting older now, I don't know what to tell you, that we don't socialize as much. We do have monthly meetings or once every two months. Other than that, there's no more socializing. Just go to work and handle your own affairs.

IH: Do you remember when the lei sellers' association was formed?

ML: That would have been in the '60s, and I would say, 1961 to. . . . Anywhere from '61 to '63.

IH: Were you still on the grass shacks at the time? The grass huts?

ML: Yes, we were. Now, they had an association prior to that, but I'm not familiar as to the dates. When we were on Lagoon Drive, they did have a group of lei sellers get together. They had an association then. But it was renewed in my time in the '60s.

IH: Oh, so you didn't belong to that first. . . .

ML: No. I did not know what was going on, what politics they had going on. And I wasn't interested. I was young and I had (other) things on my mind than knowing what the meetings were about.

IH: What is the name of your association?

ML: Presently, it's the Airport Lei Sellers Association.

IH: Do all the twelve stands belong to the association?

ML: Yes. Every one of our members are part of the lei sellers. And there's been a lot of good through this association. A lot of complaints, but our present president can't do everything. But she has done a lot. We have the usual gripes at every meeting, which is really not all that (monumental). But I'm glad I own a lei stand.

IH: What kinds of things have you learned about people in general as a learning process through the lei stand? You know, dealings with people. Because you're at the airport, you must see all kinds of people.

ML: Oh, yes. I have met the public. It leaves me with a good impression of people in general. People are basically kind. And I've seen people try to take advantage of us, me. But the local people is where our trade come from. Most of our trades come from. There's the tourist that they claim gives us more business, but I wouldn't say this is true. It's the locals that support our business. And through their friends, they're buying leis for them. But maybe throughout the year, the only time I would really say that the tourist industry, we realize funds or monies, businesses, from the tourist industry, would be during the summer. Then we have a lot of tourists. But come any other time of the year, it's the locals. You know, kids coming home for holidays, say, long weekend, Thanksgiving. The locals, the parents, will buy leis. Christmas,

visitors visiting, it's the locals again. And then, again, there's people that come in to get away from the cold weather. But majority of my trade, sales, comes from the locals. They're wonderful to deal with. Friendly, very nice. I enjoyed selling leis to locals. To the tourist, for that matter, too, but the locals are wonderful people. And I've had some wonderful experiences.

IH: Do you have any regular customers that you've had since Lagoon Drive that still come back? Maybe they went to buy from your parents and now they're still buying from you?

ML: Very few. Very few old-time customers that have continued, although there was one group of people that left me with an impression that was fabulous. Like William Patterson from United Airlines that started up and was president of United, bought leis from my parents for years and years. And for years, that man sent all of his business associates to buy leis. Till today, we still have a few of them trickling down, although Mr. Patterson has long gone. But he was a very nice man to do business with. But to say my parents' regular customers, no. It's customers that I have started up with or found.

But it was so funny, there was an incident where my parents had this customers, very nice lady, who'd come by in a big black Packard. One day she had her car stalled, and I had my mom's jeep, so I gave her a push in her Packard. So from then on, she started to buy leis from my parents. And her husband would come by, very quiet man. Didn't know who he was, never asked their names. My parents might have known, I didn't. So, finally, I got married. Years after I got married and my mother decided, "Well, we're going to go to my friend." So, I went in for my examination. And who is this doctor but Dr. Bowles himself who I sold leis to since I was (twelve) years old. Talk about a shock of my life. At that point, I was quite older. Here is this wonderful man that I've always admired is my gynecologist. It was quite a shock.

But old customers, yes, the Von Hamm-Youngs. There were, oh, Old Man Castle . . .

IH: Oh, boy, a lot of important people.

ML: Yes, there was Mrs. Dillingham that bought a lot of leis, but she wouldn't necessarily go to one place. She would spread the wealth, in her words. There's lot of other customers that I can't (recall). Duke Kahanamoku, of course, would come down, not necessarily to one place. He was a very friendly Hawaiian man. From the very top of his lungs he would yell up the road, "Aloha!" I mean, you know, it was so nice--a good feeling, very warm. It was fun times. Getting our water from the Pākē neighbor [at the truck stand].

IH: Did you folks pay that person for the water or did you just take it?

ML: Well, hopefully, I hope my parents compensated her. We had to carry buckets and buckets of water, but I don't know if they did. I hope

they did. And knowing that she was Chinese, I'm sure she saw to it that she did.

(Laughter)

ML: But it was . . .

IH: Do your children help you with your stand?

ML: When I need their help, yes. But no, they never really got involved in my business. They know very little about it, which is not much to say on my part. But I guess because I had such a hard time getting accustomed to selling leis in the beginning that I never really pushed for my children to help me. Possibly my daughter at the very most, and even then, she doesn't know all that much about it. About the only time I require their help is graduation when I'm especially busy. But other than that, no, they have never gotten involved. Today, I wish they did, but they're happy in their own jobs. But the only way to sell leis is to learn the way we did as kids. To teach our young people today to sell leis, they have to be very disciplined and know that they have to obey their parents. Other than that, I don't think they can ever learn the way we did. It was hard, but it was fun.

IH: So, do you think when you're ready to retire that one of your children will take over?

ML: Hopefully, yes. I hope they do. It'd be foolish on their part if they didn't take advantage of this lei business. You don't get rich, but you certainly live well. You can, if you mind the store.

IH: Did your husband ever go down and help you?

ML: No. Not because I didn't want him to but because I didn't think it was his place. There are some men that blend in very well helping their wives, but in my case, my husband is not the type. He'll help me to do anything else. If I need anything built, delivered--anything outside of sitting and actually stringing a lei, he would help me. It's just not for my husband to be the type of man to sit and help me string. But for some other men, it is, which is fine. I sometimes envy other women to have their husbands sit and help them. But in my case, it's just different. And I don't mind because he's a kind man in every other way and he does things that's important to him and it helps me, too. But, no, 'Iwalani, business is different.

IH: (Yes), but you still enjoy it, don't you?

ML: Thoroughly. I enjoy it. Of course, I enjoy it. I'd be foolish to say I don't enjoy it. Sometimes being in business for yourself is unenjoyable, but otherwise, it's great, for the lack of better words.

IH: Okay, I think that's all the questions I have unless you'd like to add anything else.

ML: Not really. It's been a good life. Fruitful, eventful, challenging. And business acumen has come from selling leis. It's been a (godsend blessing. There are episodes I might have forgotten to mention that were important in my life. But when you enjoy what you do and see others appreciate your handiwork, the young and the old wearing and appreciating your craft of aloha, I feel very satisfied.)

IH: Okay. Thank you.

ML: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

# **KA PO'E KAU LEI**

**An Oral History of  
Hawai'i's Lei Sellers**

**ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**Social Science Research Institute**

**University of Hawai'i at Mānoa**

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